# Saint Peregrine, O.S.M. – the patron saint of cancer patients

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The present-day management of the patient with cancer in well developed countries now consists of so many sophisticated medical, surgical and radiotherapeutic techniques that I wonder if those administering these techniques know or care about Saint Peregrine, the patron saint of cancer patients. What follows is a brief report of his life and the miracle cure that made him their patron saint.[1-5]

Peregrine Laziosi was born in 1265 in the town of Forli in northern Italy, not far from the Adriatic Sea. "His father was a wise man who traced his lineage from a famous and old Latin family; he was a man who was richer in the talents and abilities of the mind than in material resources."[1] Peregrine took an active part in the politics of his native city, which belonged to an antipapal party. On the occasion of a popular uprising Saint Philip Benizi, who had been sent by the Pope to act as a mediator, was manhandled and Peregrine himself struck St. Benizi on the face. St. Benizi's only response was to offer the other cheek. Peregrine was so impressed with the meekness and tolerance of this man that he tearfully confessed his guilt and begged forgiveness. St. Benizi forgave him and Peregrine was a reformed character, dedicating himself to a religious life. He spent many hours in prayer on his knees in the chapel of Our Lady in the Cathedral. One day the Blessed Virgin herself appeared to him and said, "Your name is Peregrine, therefore you will be both in name and in fact peregrinal (one who goes abroad). For you must go abroad to Siena straightway and when you arrive there you will find those holy men [Order of the Servants of Mary] praying: when you approach their ranks, you will ask many questions."[1] He went to Siena and was received into the order by the same Philip Benizi whom he had previously struck in the face. After some years in Siena he returned to Forli to found a new house for the order there.

He was an ideal priest, fervent in the celebration of the holy mysteries, eloquent in preaching, untiring in converting and reconciling sinners. It is reported that for 30 years he never sat down, standing while eating, kneeling while praying and leaning against a rock or church bench while sleeping.

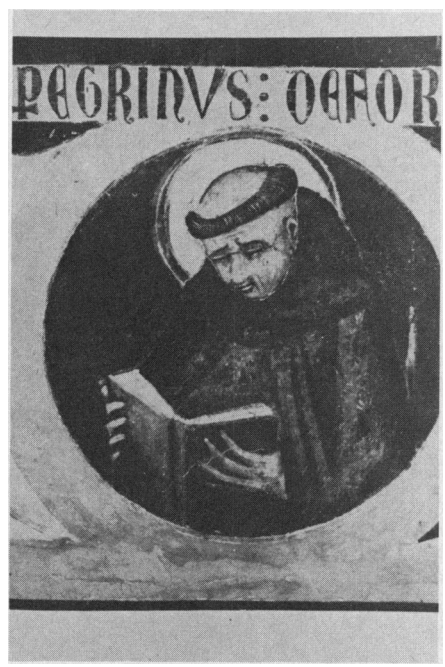


FIG. 1—Saint Peregrine of Forli, reproduced from "Santorale Antico Dei Servi".[2]

Peregrine spent 62 years of his life in the Servites. He died in 1345 at the age of 80. He is reported to have performed, both personally and through prayers to him after his death, such miracles as curing the blind, removing evil spirits and healing severe abdominal injuries. In 1726 he was canonized. He was a popular saint not only in Italy but also in Austria and Spain. It is said that on four separate occasions (1608, 1697, 1715 and 1926) when his remains were exhumed for inspection the body was found intact.

Some time in the latter part of his life a disease "... which caused this decaying and so strange swelling of his shin, which they call cancer, came most harshly; from it such a horrible stench was given off that it could be endured by no one sitting by him."[1] He was visited by a physician called Paulus Salatius, who could find no cure and recommended amputation of the limb. The night before the operation Peregrine dragged himself to the meeting room of the order and prayed before a wall fresco depicting the Crucifixion of Christ. After much prayer he fell asleep. When he awoke his shin was normal. He gave thanks and returned to his room. When the physician came in the morning to perform the operation, Peregrine told of the cure. The physician thought that Peregrine was out of his mind because of the severity of the disease. " 'Show me your shin,' Paulus Salatius said, 'so that I may protect you from the infective destruction of your whole body.' Peregrine replied, 'O doctor, cure yourself; that skill of yours is not necessary for me. The First Doctor and Supporter of human safety for his Name's sake has driven all my sickness from me.' Immediately

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pointing to his shin, 'Look with your eyes', he said, 'Recognize what Doctor I have had.' Then the physician was astonished in a marvellous manner when he saw the skin so free, so whole, that no signs of so great a tumour were seen, no scars of wasting cancer, and he said to his companions, 'O great miracle!' [*O miraculum ingens.* (Italian — *O fatto stupendo*)]. Immediately the fame of such a thing was spread far and wide and it produced very great adoration from all for Peregrine."[1]

It is not easy to know exactly the nature of Peregrine's leg lesion. Prior to the 16th century the words cancer and canker were used interchangeably to mean an eating, spreading sore or ulcer; a gangrene (O.E.D.). So although in the oldest reference I have the Latin word *cancer* was used, it should be clear that in English, at least, cancer did not then necessarily mean a new growth in the sense that it now does. My differential diagnosis of Peregrine's leg lesion would be (a) a malignant growth, perhaps squamous cell type, (b) a stasis ulcer and (c) ischemic gangrene. M. Loreti, after a re-examination of Peregrine's corpse in 1959, came to the conclusion that Peregrine's sore *(piaga)* was caused by varicose veins, presumably aggravated by his habit of standing for long periods of time.[6] If it was a cancer and did disappear as has been reported, we would now say it was a case of spontaneous regression and mumble something about the interplay of host resistance and tumour invasiveness.

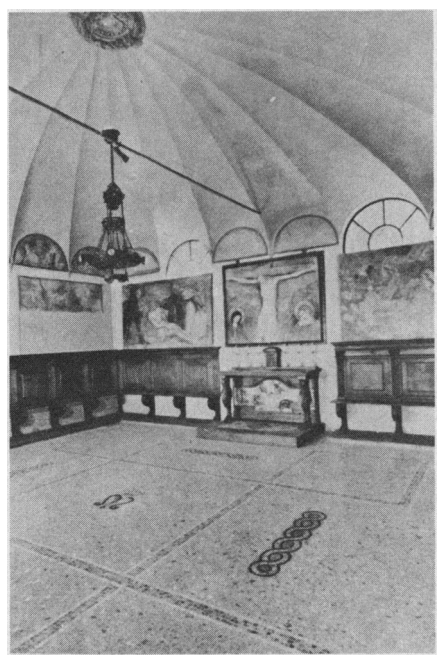

FIG. 2—The meeting room of the convent of the Servants of Mary in Forli. The fresco of the Crucifixion shown above the prayer table is the one that, according to tradition, healed Saint Peregrine's cancerous leg ulcer. Reproduced from "Santorale Antico Dei Servi".[2]


Not being a classical scholar, I have had to rely on others to help me prepare this paper. Mr. J. J. Burrows of Nepean High School, Ottawa, translated the Borghese report from the Latin. Dr. Lou Neri of Ottawa obtained for me information on the life of St. Peregrine in "Santorale Antico Dei Servi" and helped me translate the Italian into English. Father Allie, O.M.I., Librarian of St. Paul University, Ottawa opened his library to me and helped me locate and translate background material.


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